

Reflections on 24 years in small-business development

Contributed by Mel Brooks
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At the start of a new decade: my reflections on 24 years in Small Business and Management Development

My work at the Graduate School of Business Administration, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa – more popularly known as the Wits Business School (WBS) has provided me with invaluable experience. This broadened and built on that which I gained while working in industry.

During my time at the business school it has been a great privilege for me to have interaction with a wide variety of people from all sectors of commerce and industry both at a senior management level and also with hundreds of ‘new’ managers. It certainly was a busy time for me. During some weeks at the WBS I had up to four programmes running simultaneously. Of course, none of this would have been possible without the support and input of a great team of lecturers. I have in fact been involved in a great variety of work and I am thankful for the fact that I have had twenty years of valuable experience and certainly not, as the saying goes, 20 times 1 year’s experience.

While the latter 10 years at the WBS have been deeply enriching, the first ten years were spent in the wonderful learning ground that was the Centre for Developing Business (CDB). This was a small-business development unit based within the Faculty of Management (WBS).

The Centre was started in 1978 and received seed funding from S A Breweries and later from the Department of Trade and Industries which funded a number of posts. It also received funding from a number of corporates and generated its own funding from the programmes it offered to the SMME and corporate sector. The Centre for Developing Business was regarded as having played a leadership role in the small business development sector.

The Centre offered advice/counselling/consulting services to members of the public who were either considering starting businesses or who had started businesses and required business information and advice. A number of training programmes were offered and attended by thousands of participants. Some examples of these were:

- Running a Business from Home – aimed at the micro/informal sector.
- Business Basics – aimed at the same sector.
- Start your own business – designed for small businesses which would operate in the formal sector.
- Managing the Growing Firm – developed for established formal sector businesses with growth potential.
- Retail Development Programme – catering for small township retailers.

The Centre also carried out training for the Small Business Development Corporation. Apart from its small business activities the Centre ran other programmes the most notable of which were: The Management Advancement Programme (MAP). Started by Dr Steven Black in the late 70s, it was run at the CDB until the late 80s when it was moved to the WBS. The New Managers Programme (NMP) was started by me at the CDB in 1991 and was moved to the WBS in 1997. Two business-journalist development programmes (each consisted of six one-week blocks) were run by me with the guidance of Mr Raymond Louw, a past editor of the Rand Daily Mail. A number of introductory workshops in finance were run for journalists from the business media. Workshops on ‘How to Consult to Small Business Owners’ were also offered. The ‘Professional Practice as a Small Business’ workshops I developed were attended by a wide range of professionals.

A number of publications were produced by the Centre which offered information and business techniques to the SMME sector. Centre staff also hosted TV programmes on the old SABC TV 2 & 3. There was also a regular weekly radio programme I hosted which was broadcast on the English service of Radio South Africa during a period of a year and I wrote business columns for The Sowetan on a weekly basis for a period of four years. The Centre published the ‘SMME Development Monitor’ and an annual directory of SMME service-providing organisations – although last published in 1995 I still get letters requesting this publication.

On the personal front, I co-authored with John Bradshaw in writing Business Accounting & Finance for Managers and Business Students (Juta) which is still prescribed today.

Another very successful initiative of the Centre was the founding of Junior Achievement (JA) in South Africa. Based on the US JA model this highly successful initiative exposed thousands of school going teenagers to entrepreneurship. JA outgrew the Centre because its large number of participants could no longer be accommodated at the Centre. It also required more space for the staff to manage what had become a national operation. There were JA operations in Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, East London, Durban, Witbank and Pretoria. JA is still in operation as an independent entity. The Centre stopped operating at the end of 1996.

I was then asked to move across to the main WBS where I have developed and run many programmes including the New Managers Programme which has grown significantly in terms of the number of programmes both in-company and public.

This is a brief and by no means comprehensive summary of my activities over the past 20 years.

Now I look to a new era, one in which I will be bring my extensive experience to focus on:

- Developing and growing the new subscription-based small business community website known as Brooks on Biz – www.brooksonbiz.com
- My executive coaching practice which has grown substantially over the past years. This has come to be a large part of my business and I find it very rewarding working with so many talented senior managers – see www.melbrooks.co.za
- Offering my two-day (or three day – it depends on the backgrounds of the participants) workshops: Finance for Non -Financial Managers (a.k.a. Operational Finance). I have presented this workshop hundreds of times for companies on an in-house basis, for training companies and as an introductory front end on the WBS’s Certificate Programme in Finance and Accounting and other programmes.
- I will also continue consulting in the small business development area
- Being available to lecture management accounting (my favourite) and introductory costing, accounting and finance.

I’m looking forward to a busy next 10 years.